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AUTHOR Rohfeld, Rae; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Although library buildings often house both library and archival (i.e., manuscript) collections, the approaches to library and manuscript collections are quite different, and obtaining information from libraries and archives involves different processes. In general, libraries maintain published book and periodicals that are duplicated in many places. In contrast, archives and manuscript collections usually hold unpublished, often unique materials. Libraries organize their collections by card catalogs, indexes, and other research tools; archival materials tend to be organized by type of document--e.g., correspondence, business records, or minutes. Authors of published materials address their works to a particular audience, while archival collections include whatever people saved in the course of conducting their business or living their lives. Thus, archival researchers must be particularly sensitive to the context in which a document was produced. Archival materials may include records of actions taken or decisions made by people or organizations, photographs or other pictorial materials depicting a particular activity or period, and unpublished primary source materials that can be used to build a case for a particular construction of the past. The researcher should recognize that, for many types of inquiries, archival material is inappropriate and could be misleading. For example, the researcher who is trying to understand a particular episode would find it more productive to look in the current published literature than to consult a direct report by one of the participants, which would probably represent only one view and could be biased. (3 suggested readings) (SD)

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Introduction to Archival Research

HOW ARE LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES DIFFERENT?

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Authors
Rae Rohfeld
Terrance Keenan
Elizabeth Oddy

Editors
Roger Hiemstra
Mary Beth Hinton

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HOW ARE LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES DIFFERENT?

Most researchers feel at home in a library. They are knowledgeable about the catalog and familiar with indexes and data bases that are relevant to their fields. However, unless they have learned historical methodology, they are not likely to be familiar with archival research. Perhaps because library buildings house both library and archival or manuscript collections, many people think they can obtain information from them by the same process. However, the approaches to library collections and manuscript collections are quite different. ("Manuscript" and "archival" will be used synonymously in this piece, although there are technical differences between them.)

Holdings

In a general sense, libraries maintain books and periodicals. These are published items, duplicated in many places. In contrast, archives and manuscript collections usually hold unpublished, often unique, written or printed material. They generally consist of personal papers of an individual or records of an organization. Usually a given collection is available in only one repository.

Organization

People come to libraries looking for works by particular authors, for specific titles, or for information about certain subjects. Librarians organize card catalogs, indexes, and other library tools,

either manual or automated, to respond to such needs. Archival and manuscript materials, on the other hand, tend to be organized by type of document: correspondence, business records, minutes, membership lists, etc. Papers or records usually occur within a collection in groups rather than as individual items. (For example,the Adult Education Association Collection may have folders labeled, "Correspondence, 1950-1952"; "Committee reports, 1953"; etc.) The documents are stored in boxes and folders, which are identified in the finding aid. Subject headings like those attached to books in libraries appear rarely, except in a very general way when attached to large groups of documents. Archives have finding aids describing the collections and their organization so that researchers can identify documents that are likely to help them.

Function

Authors of published materials address their works to a particular audience. Library reference tools help members of that audience identify the relevant materials. Authors of archival materials, however, do not create them for the use of scholars, historians, or any outside audience. Rather, these documents are the results of the activity of the actors; they are the artifacts of carrying out the business of life. Researchers are essentially looking in on this business in order to construct a story. To use the collections and aids effectively, the researcher must know the context in which documents about a subject would have been produced.

Context

A published book provides a context for the concepts, ideas, and people it discusses. However, when using archival documents, the researcher must provide the context. In archives, much assistance comes directly from consultation with archivists. Archivists help researchers find appropriate information by matching the researchers' questions against the archivists' knowledge of the collections and the entities that produced those

collections. A great deal of inference is necessary. Which committees would have dealt with the subject? At what time was the subject under active discussion? Were particular personalities associated with the subject? Relationships among people and groups and ideas provide the subject-access links. For archivists to give this kind of assistance, they must have extensive understanding not just of the material in collections, but of the environment in which activities documented by a collection took place. The documents are evidence of relationships within an ongoing saga.

WHY USE ARCHIVAL SOURCES?

The contents of archival collections include whatever people saved in the course of conducting their businesses or living their lives. Depending on the propensity for saving of the people involved, particular collections may be rich or sparse. For many researchers new to the use of such materials, the idea of working with the reports, budgets, or correspondence of the original people involved is very exciting. Before digging in, however, it is important to know whether these sources are appropriate for the purposes the researcher has in mind.

Conducting Business

Since archives evolve out of the work of people and organizations, their contents can reveal actions taken or decisions made. Particularly in recent times, many organizations maintain certain records because they are required to do so by government agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service or the Social Security Administration. Other records are maintained in order to verify contractual agreements and various business interactions. From the perspective of the creators of archives, these records are old files that hold information they might need for business purposes. If they have to prove that something occurred or provide legally-required information, they would expect to find what they need in their archives.

Locating Illustrative Materials

Writers, teachers, and other individuals may go to archives to locate various kinds of specific information or documents. Someone might be interested in examples of by-laws that could be found in the records of organizations. Someone else might want speeches by a certain individual or from a certain time. Another person might want to locate photographs depicting a particular period or activity. Researchers can use archives as sources of materials for illustrating aspects of a field.

Constructing History

Archives are most often sources for historical research. The historian sifts through documents looking for evidence that will help build a case for a particular construction of the past. Sometimes the historian pursues questions that no one seems to have studied before; hence the available published literature is limited and marginal. The only way to acquire the knowledge is to conduct research in those documents that are germane to the issue. For example, a scholar may be interested in the relationship of Workers' Education and the Social Gospel and believe that a study of Edmund Chaffee's work at the New York Labor Temple would be a contribution to knowledge in this area. By using the Chaffee papers in the Syracuse University Library, along with other relevant manuscript collections elsewhere, the scholar could construct a history of the Labor Temple and the community it served.

Sometimes literature on a topic exists, but a researcher believes that the existing scholarship in the field is inadequate or insufficient or needs to be approached from a new perspective. Manuscript evidence may have come to light that previous writers did not know about or failed to use for other reasons. The scholar might then use archival sources to revise our knowledge of the topic.

A special type of historical research for which writers turn to archives is biography. The same criteria apply to biographical research as to other types of historical research. It may be that no

one has written a biography of a particular person. Research in that individual's papers, along with the papers of other people with whom the individual had dealings, would be essential to produce such a work. Even when other biographies are available, however, if the researcher's questions suggest a new approach to, or interpretation of, the subject's life, archival research would be necessary

Once a scholar begins archival research, many routes of investigation emerge. The researcher will find relationships to be investigated that lead to other manuscript collections, often located in other repositories. Because individual items in any collection reflect one person's perception (and may even contain outright mistakes or untruths), it is necessary to find as much evidence as possible in order to verify information and build an authentic picture of what happened.

Matching Evidence to Purpose

For many types of inquiries archival material is inappropriate and, perhaps, misleading. If a researcher is trying to understand a particular episode, he or she may like the idea of searching manuscripts to find a direct report of an event by a participant However, such a report represents one view, often a very biased one. More benefit is likely to come by finding the most balanced picture rather than the most direct reports. In such cases, a book written by someone who has already studied the activity from many perspectives would probably best meet the scholar's purpose. For example, if one wants to understand the Watergate episode, one would probably choose to read the Woodward-Bernstein book, *All the President's Men*, rather than files of Nixon's memos. Often researchers are interested in what the state of knowledge is about a certain topic, for instance, the best method for teaching low-literate adults or recent developments in continuing medical education. Research in archival collections of literacy organizations or continuing education professional associations would not address the state of knowledge on these issues. For such questions, research in the current published literature is likely to be more productive.

Approaching Historical Research

For the researcher new to historical inquiry and/or archival research, several sources can be helpful in preparation. Numerous books are available that describe historical methodology and discuss questions of interpretation. Reading well-researched historical literature will provide good models for the researcher. To begin this preparation, the following sources are recommended:

Suggested Readings on Historical Research

Barzun, J., and Graff, H. F. (1985) *The Modern Researcher*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Brooks, P. C. (1969). *Research in Archives: The Use of Unpublished Primary Sources*. Chicago.

Prucha, F. P. (1987). *Handbook for Research in American History*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Suggested Models for Study

American Historical Review
History of Education Quarterly
Journal of American History

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